

**EGYPT STRUGGLES TO CONTAIN ISLAMIST VIOLENCE &
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[In Egypt, Pride Above Economy?](#): Michael Rubin, *Commentary*, Apr. 25, 2017 — It’s one of the ironies of Middle Eastern studies and Western media that the Israel-Palestinian conflict tends to get outside coverage in comparison to so many other matters more pertinent to local Arabs.

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Samuel Tadros

[*New York Times*](#), May 26, 2017

“At this rate Copts will be extinct in 100 years. They will die, leave, convert or get killed,” a friend wrote on Facebook as news broke of the latest bloody attack on Egypt’s Coptic Christians. Less than two months ago, while attending church in Cairo on Palm Sunday, my friend told me she’d mused to herself that it was a blessing her daughter wasn’t with her: If there was a bombing, at least her child would survive. Forty-five Copts were murdered that day by the Islamic State in churches in Alexandria and Tanta. Such are the thoughts of Coptic parents in Egypt these days.

The terrorists chose today’s target well. The Monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor, which I visited a decade ago, is very hard to reach. One hundred and ten miles on the Cairo Luxor desert road, you make a right-hand turn and for the next 17 miles drive on an unpaved road. The single lane forces cars to drive slowly, and, as the only route leading to the monastery, the victims were guaranteed to be Copts. Friday is a day off in Egypt, and church groups regularly take trips there. Outside of a few policemen stationed out front, there is little security presence. The terrorists waited on the road like game hunters. Coming their way were three buses, one with Sunday school children. Only three of them survived. Their victims were asked to recite the Islamic declaration of faith before being shot.

In the past few months, the Islamic State has made its intentions toward Copts well known. “Our favorite prey” they called my co-religionists in a February video. Their barbaric attacks have left more than 100 Copts dead in the last few months alone. The Northern Sinai is now “*Christianfrei*,” or free of Christians. Many serious questions will be asked in the next few days. How has the Islamic State been able to build such an extensive network inside mainland Egypt? Is the Islamic State moving its operations to Egypt as it faces pressure in Iraq and Syria? And why has Egypt repeatedly failed to prevent these attacks?

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All of these questions are important and require thoughtful deliberation by the Egyptian regime and its allies around the world. But these are not the questions on the minds of my Coptic friends at home. They have far more intimate concerns: Am I putting my children's lives at risk by remaining here? Should we leave? And what country will take us? In February 2014, I met the head of the Jewish community in Egypt, Magda Haroun. Today, she told me, there are 15 Jews left in the country, out of a population that once stood at nearly 100,000. Ms. Haroun said she was afraid the Copts would soon follow.

At the time I thought the prospect was overblown. There are millions of Copts in Egypt. Where would all of them possibly go? Surely some will remain, I reasoned. But I had left the country myself in 2009 — and so have hundreds of thousands of Copts. Even before the recent wave of attacks, Copts have been packing their bags and bidding 2,000 years of history farewell. As more find permanent homes in the West, more are able to bring relatives over. Ms. Haroun was right.

The Monastery of St. Samuel the Confessor — where one of the giants of the modern Coptic church, Father Matthew the Poor, was ordained in 1948 — is the only remaining monastery of 35 that once existed in the area. Copts had always been tied to Egypt, their very name derived from the Greek word for the country, Aigýptios. Despite waves of persecution at the hands of everyone from Roman and Byzantine emperors, Arab and Muslim governors and Egypt's modern presidents, they have refused to leave. Their country once gave refuge to the young Jesus. Where will they now find sanctuary?

In 1954 an Egyptian movie called "Hassan, Marcus and Cohen" was produced. The comedy's title represented characters from Islam, Christianity and Judaism. In 2008, a new movie, "Hassan and Marcus" hit theaters. It warned of the growing sectarian strife between Egypt's Christians and Muslims. Fifty years from now, it seems likely that the sequel will just be "Hasan."

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'THE REAL BOMB IS IN ISLAM'S BOOKS'

Raymond Ibrahim

[Frontpage](#), May 3, 2017

During his visit to Egypt last week, “Pope Francis visited al-Azhar University, a globally respected institution for Sunni Islamic learning,” and “met with Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb, the imam of the government-run Al-Azhar mosque and an Islamic philosophy professor.” This has been reported by several media and with much fanfare.

The problem is that Sheikh Tayeb, once voted “world’s most influential Muslim,” and Al Azhar, the important madrassa he heads, are part of the problem, not the solution. Tayeb is a renowned master of exhibiting one face to fellow Muslims in Egypt—one that supports the death penalty for “apostates,” calls for the totality of Sharia-rule, refuses to denounce ISIS of being un-Islamic, denounces all art as immoral, and rejects the very concept of reforming Islam—and another face to non-Muslims.

Consider, for instance, the words of Islam al-Behery—a popular Egyptian Muslim reformer who frequently runs afoul of Islamists in Egypt who accuse him of blasphemy and apostasy from Islam. The day after the suicide bombings of two Coptic Christian churches in Egypt, the Muslim scholar was interviewed by phone on a popular Egyptian television program (*Amr Adib's kul youm*, or “Every Day”). He spent most of his time on the air blasting Al Azhar and Ahmed al-Tayeb—at one

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point going so far as to say that “70-80 percent of all terror in the last 5 years is a product of Al Azhar.”

The reformer knows what he speaks of; in 2015, al- Behery’s televised calls to reform Islam so irked Al Azhar that the venerable Islamic institution accused him of “blaspheming” against Islam, which led to his imprisonment. Now Behery says that, ever since President Sisi implored Al Azhar to make reforms to how Islam is being taught in Egypt three years ago, the authoritative madrassa “has not reformed a single thing,” only offered words. “If they were sincere about one thing, they would have protected hundreds, indeed thousands of lives from being killed in just Egypt alone, said al-Behery.

By way of examples, the scholar of Islam pointed out that Al Azhar still uses books in its curriculum which teach things like “whoever kills an infidel, his blood is safeguarded, for the blood of an infidel and believer [Muslim] are not equal.” Similarly, he pointed to how Sheikh Ahmed al-Tayeb claims that ISIS members are not infidels, only deluded Muslims; but those whom they kill—such as the bombed Christians—are infidels, the worst label in Islam’s lexicon.

Debating Behery was an Al Azhar spokesman who naturally rejected the reformer’s accusations against the Islamic madrassa, adding that the source of problems in Egypt is not the medieval institution, but rather “new” ideas that came to Egypt from 20th century “radicals” like Hasan al-Bana and Sayyid Qutb, founding leaders/ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood. Behery’s response was refreshing; those many Western analysts who follow the same line of thinking—that “radicalism” only came after thinkers like Bana, Qutb, Mawdudi (in Pakistan) or Wahhab (in Arabia) came on the scene—would do well to listen. After saying that “blaming radicalism on these men is very delusional,” the reformer correctly added:

The man who kills himself [Islamic suicide bomber] today doesn’t kill himself

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because of the words of Hasan al-Bana or Sayyid al-Qutb, or anyone else. He kills himself because of what the consensus of the *ulema*, and the four schools of jurisprudence, have all agreed to. Hasan al-Bana did not create these ideas [of jihad against infidels and apostates, destroying churches, etc.]; they've been around for many, many centuries.... I am talking about Islam [now], not how it is being taught in schools. By way of example, Behery said if anyone today walks into any Egyptian mosque or bookstore and ask for a book that contains the rulings of the four schools of jurisprudence, "everything that is happening today will be found in them; killing the people of the book [Christians and Jews] is obligatory. Let's not start kidding each other and blaming such thoughts on Hassan al-Bana!" Moreover, Behery said:

There is a short distance between what is written in all these old books and what happened yesterday [Coptic church bombings]—the real bomb is in the books, which repeatedly call the People of the Book "infidels," which teach that the whole world is infidel... Hassan al-Bana and Sayyid al-Qutb are not the source of the terror, rather they are followers of these books. Spare me with the term Qutbism which has caused the nation to suffer terrorism for 50 years.

Behery does not blame Al Azhar for the existence of these books; rather he, like many reformers, wants the Islamic institution to break tradition, denounce the rulings of the four schools of law as the products of fallible mortals, and reform them in ways compatible to the modern world. He said that, whereas Egypt's former grand imam, Sheikh Muhammad Sayyid Tantawi (d. 2010), had "without even being asked removed all the old books and placed just one introductory book, when al-Tayeb [who days ago embraced Pope Francis] came, he got rid of that book and brought all the old books back, which are full of slaughter and bloodshed." In short, Behery called on the Egyptian government—and here the Vatican would do well to listen—not to rely on Al Azhar to make any reforms, since if anything it has taken Egypt backwards.

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IN EGYPT, PRIDE ABOVE ECONOMY?

Michael Rubin

[Commentary](#), Apr. 25, 2017

It's one of the ironies of Middle Eastern studies and Western media that the Israel-Palestinian conflict tends to get outsize coverage in comparison to so many other matters more pertinent to local Arabs. Consider border disputes: From Morocco across the region to Iran, the only neighbors who do not have border disputes are Israel and Egypt, Israel and Jordan, Algeria and Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar and, ever since accepting international arbitration, Bahrain, and Qatar.

Intra-Arab border disputes can be as intractable as those involving Israel and can be far more violent. Consider, for example, the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait or the constant Syrian infringement on Lebanese sovereignty that played out to devastating effect during the 1975-1992 civil war and, arguably, to the present day. While Iran is not Arab, the war between it and Iraq sparked by a border dispute ended up killing hundreds of thousands.

Egypt is the largest Arab country; one out of every five Arabs—perhaps even more—live in Egypt. In November 2016, as part of an International Monetary Fund package of reforms, Egypt floated its currency and, overnight, the Egyptian currency lost more than half of its value compared to the U.S. dollar, more than doubling the cost of imported goods. To be fair, Egypt had no choice. It was hemorrhaging money as a result of subsidies and should have reformed its currency three or four decades ago. Politically, Egyptians are also exhausted. The last decade has seen the Arab Spring, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, and their subsequent ouster in what many in the West call a coup and Egyptians call a revolution. Recent Islamic State attacks on Egyptian churches raise the specter of

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growing terrorism. Domestic problems seem so great that Egyptians concentrate on just getting by.

So, with so many huge issues with which to deal, what motivates Egyptians? Last year, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi agreed to transfer to uninhabited islands—Tiran and Sanafir—back to Saudi Arabia, thus ending a decades-long dispute between the two countries. Enter Egyptian nationalism and pride: Egyptians took to the streets twice last April to protest the “selling” of Egyptian land to the Saudis, even though ample documentation existed that the islands were Saudi all along: The Saudis invited an Egyptian garrison on the islands in the 1950s against the backdrop of the Arab-Israel dispute, but government hostility between Egypt and Saudi Arabia on one hand and Israel on the other has largely faded and the garrisons are long gone.

Sisi probably erred in announcing the islands’ return against the backdrop of receiving a multibillion dollar aid package from Riyadh, but such unfortunate optics do not change the historical facts. Still, nationalism can be a potent tool, and Egyptians were willing to pick a fight with one of their closest Arab allies no matter that Egypt at best was holding an empty hand and Saudi Arabia had a full house. While an Egyptian court had stayed the transfer in January, an upper court blocked that stay earlier this month to allow the transfer to go through, but that decision was immediately appealed. The courts should now issue a final ruling in June.

Egypt has many problems but Tiran and Sanafir should not be among them. Sisi is on the right track in trying to resolve long-standing diplomatic disputes. That his opposition seeks to resurrect these disputes to whip up public opposition, however, shows just how difficult substantive reform can be in a society for decades shaped by incitement.

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NASSER'S LEGACY ON THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE 1967 WAR

Dr. Michael Sharnoff

[BESA](#), May 21, 2017

Cairo was the political capital of the Middle East in the 1950s and 1960s. Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was the most charismatic ruler in the region, and he tried to become the undisputed leader of the Arab world. In his 1954 memoir, *The Philosophy of the Revolution*, Nasser revealed his vision of Egypt as a unique geostrategic influence in the African, Arab, and Islamic world. He believed Egypt was destined to play a pivotal role in Arab affairs.

Initially, Nasser was concerned primarily with consolidating power and expelling the British from Egypt. After stabilizing his rule by suppressing communists and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, he championed pan-Arabism as a strategic tactic to unify the Arab world under his command. Pan-Arabism was a secular ideology that advocated Arab unity, freedom from foreign control, and the liberation of Palestine - a euphemism for a Palestinian state built on Israel's ruins.

Nasser's political star rose after he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 and subsequently survived a direct assault from the UK, France, and Israel. He graced international venues as a hero of the Nonaligned Movement, rubbing shoulders with established anti-imperialist leaders like Tito of Yugoslavia, Nehru of India, Nkrumah of Ghana, and Sukarno of Indonesia. No major world leader could dispute Nasser's growing popularity and legitimacy.

Through his spokesperson Muhammad Heikal, editor of Egypt's state-run newspaper *al-Ahram*, Nasser adopted a brilliant strategic communications campaign to shape and influence public opinion. Cairo became the Arab capital of influence. Nasser's policies were cautiously observed by Israel, neighboring Arab states, and the Western powers, as well as the Soviet Union. In the era of Cold War

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rivalry, Nasser adroitly played off the two rival superpowers to maximize his country's economic, political, and military stature while offering minimal concessions.

Nasser's Egypt demonstrated how a developing country with a large population could persevere in the face of tremendous economic, political, and military challenges. Despite the expectations of Western and Soviet intelligence officials, the regime did not collapse. Egypt lost the Sinai Peninsula and the Gaza Strip after the 1967 War, but Nasser managed to turn that stunning military defeat into a political victory. He employed skillful diplomacy at the UN to appease Moscow and the West in order to rebuild Egypt's military and sustain his own unique leadership status in the Arab world.

Nasser remained defiant. Egypt endured, despite losing territory and suffering from a depressed economy due to a collapse in tourism and the closure of the Suez Canal. After the war, Egypt lost \$30 million a month to lost Canal revenues and an additional \$1.5 million in tourism each week. (The Canal remained closed until 1975, when Israel withdrew its troops from the east bank as part of US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy and the second Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreement).

After Nasser's untimely death in 1970, other Arab leaders like Qaddafi, Assad, and Saddam tried to replicate his successes - but none had the charisma or mandate to shape public opinion and extract concessions from Washington and Moscow. Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, long suppressed under Nasser, gradually resurfaced, capitalizing on the political and ideological vacuum. Those movements argued that Muslims had become weak because Nasser, Qaddafi, Saddam, and Assad were not true believers. They had failed to implement *sharia* (Islamic law), aligned with *kuffar* (infidel) Western or Russian powers, and abandoned the pursuit of the liberation of Palestine. They had become apostates, unfit to rule, and should be replaced with Islamic governance.

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The solution to secular pan-Arabism, in their view, was Islam. They promoted Islam as the only ideology with the capacity to satisfy Muslim aspirations. Secularism, nationalism, liberalism, socialism, and communism were foreign concepts incompatible with Muslims. The Muslim Brotherhood expanded its influence through social services and redoubled its devotion to the eventual construction of an Islamic state governed by *sharia*. Extremist Islamist movements like al-Qaeda and ISIS continue to seek to achieve these goals by engaging in terrorism against the West and committing genocide against non-conforming Muslims and ethnic and religious minorities.

The removal of Saddam and subsequent violence and instability of the 2003 Iraq War, the 2011 uprisings in the Arab world, and the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) accelerated the expansion of these non-state Islamist actors, as well as Iran. In this “new” Middle East, these players compete for influence while Egyptian and Arab leaders grapple with instability, insurgency, civil war, and failed states.

Egypt’s declining influence shows no sign of reversing itself in the near future. In 2017, there is no Arab leader remotely resembling Nasser in terms of prestige. As the 50th anniversary of the 1967 War approaches, many Egyptians from that generation might reflect with nostalgia on a bygone era when Egypt dominated Middle Eastern affairs.

The ultimate lesson of the 1967 War is the total shift of power and influence from Egypt to non-state Islamist actors and Iran. Egypt can barely contend with the scores of domestic challenges it faces, let alone project influence beyond its borders. Cairo struggles to contain an Islamist insurgency in Sinai, protect its Christian population, sustain its economy, and provide meaningful twenty-first century skills and jobs to its youth to prevent brain drain and radicalization.

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On Topic Links

[Memorial Day: Remembering America's Fallen Heroes: Jeff Dunetz, Jewish Press, May 29, 2017](#)—The 30th day of May, 1868, is designated for the purpose of strewing with flowers, or otherwise decorating the graves of comrades who died in defense of their country during the late rebellion...

[Trump on Egypt Attack: 'Bloodletting of Christians Must End': Times of Israel, May 27, 2017](#)— US President Donald Trump on Friday decried an attack on Coptic Christians in Egypt that left at least 28 dead, calling on allies to band together to defeat terrorism.

["Drip-Drip" Genocide: Muslim Persecution of Christians, February, 2017: Raymond Ibrahim, Gatestone Institute, May 28, 2017](#)— The Islamic State is at it again.

[Sinai Bedouin Aligning with Egypt Against ISIS: Yoni Ben Menachem, JCPA, May 4, 2017](#)— In its battle against ISIS in the Sinai Peninsula, one of the main difficulties facing the Egyptian army has been the absence of accurate, real-time intelligence on the location of ISIS forces, experts on the war on terror agree. But it seems this problem is about to be resolved due to a series of missteps by the ISIS branch in Sinai involving the Bedouin Tarabin tribe, the largest tribe in Sinai.

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